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# In Defense of Our Brothers' Cause: Argentine Perspectives on the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939

## **Abstract**

Long a country of two faces – European and Latin American – Argentina saw the woes of the Spanish Civil War as deeply reflective of their struggles and immensely predictive of their fate. Their preoccupation with the war's outcome was at once an expression of the country's long-simmering identity crisis and an attempt to affirm its Hispanic otherness, particularly in the wake of the 1930 coup d'état. This article explores the subtleties of this identity crisis with an eye toward determining the motives underlying claims and references to Spain, an exploration which rests primarily on the nexus of social and cultural history and secondarily on their intersection with political history. Appealing to the writings of intellectuals, politicians, and clergy, as well as newspaper accounts of the time, this article outlines Argentine framing of the Spanish Civil War in an attempt to elucidate its cultural and political character.

## **Keywords**

Argentina, Spain, Spanish Civil War, Cultural History, Social History, Hispanic Studies, History, Antonio Feros, Feros, Antonio

## **Disciplines**

Cultural History | European History | Latin American History | Political History | Social History

**IN DEFENSE OF OUR BROTHERS' CAUSE: ARGENTINE PERSPECTIVES  
ON THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, 1936 – 1939**

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April 28, 2014

## INTRODUCTION

There are few countries that, during the scope of the twentieth century, displayed so strong an affinity for their former colonizer as Argentina. The reasons behind this affinity are, to be sure, layered and complex. The substantial Spanish émigré population residing in the country surely played a role in increasing the frequency of contacts and deepening connections; in fact, by 1936 immigrant Spaniards may have comprised up to fifteen percent of Argentina's population.<sup>1</sup> But this alone does not account for the pervasive Spanish influences in Argentina's cultural, literary, and artistic traditions, nor does it wholly explain the unending claims and references to Spain during the Spanish Civil War, a time of crisis and reshaping for both.

This paper aims to dissect Argentine writing on the Spanish Civil War. More specifically, it will examine the writings of poets, clergy, politicians, and intellectuals, among others, with an eye toward determining the motives behind comparisons to Spain. The paper will endeavor to strike a balance between perspectives and capture as broad a range of positions as possible in an attempt to reflect the complexity of the relationship between the two countries. A brief dip into the politics of Argentina during the 1930s will give shape to the climate in which writing was taking place and will be followed by an evaluation of Argentine claims to a shared cultural heritage. Finally, the paper will analyze the framing of the Spanish Civil war to identify continuities and departures across accounts.

While a number of historians have written on Argentina during the 1930s, there is little coverage of the Spanish Civil War as it was observed and understood through the eyes of Argentines. Most scholarship centers either on the ideological parallels between the two or the mobilization of political and cultural forces in Argentina in response to the war. Argentine

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Falcoff, "Argentina," in *The Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: American Hemispheric Perspectives*, ed. Mark Falcoff and Frederick B. Pike (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 291.

scholar Ernesto Goldar, for example, explores the galvanizing effect the war had on cultural life in Buenos Aires, tracing in particular the proliferation of poetry. Argentine responses to the 1936 death of famed Spanish poet Federico García Lorca are also featured in Goldar's work. Yet, both subjects consume only ten pages in the 240-page book, entitled *Los Argentinos y La Guerra Civil Española*.

Historian Niall Binns also examines Argentina's responses to the Spanish Civil War, but his research outlines the mobilization of the left and right, consigning his work to realm of political history. Though some space is devoted to the responses of major Argentine newspapers, it is only in service to broader explorations. Likewise, scholar Mark Falcoff delves briefly into the cultural links between Spain and Argentina, laying emphasis on the ideological and political evolution of Argentina during the 1930s. While most scholars agree the Hispano-Argentine connection ran peculiarly deep, little has been done to assess the particularities of this connection through the lens of Argentine writing. The question of what the domestic framing of the Spanish Civil War reveals about Argentines and their understanding of conditions within and without their borders is one that has been seldom addressed.

My argument rests on two assertions. First, I will argue Argentines saw the Spanish Civil War as a direct reflection of their own struggles and so put pen to paper to make sense of this reflection. Second, I will argue the framing of the war spoke more to the tensions of Argentina than the actualities of the civil war in Spain. A brief detour into the political climate of Argentina during the time will help contextualize my argument and give shape to Argentina's sociopolitical zeitgeist.

### **THE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN ARGENTINA DURING THE 1930s**

At the start of the Spanish Civil War, Argentina was experiencing strong currents of change. From September 6, 1930, to February 20, 1932, the country had been governed by Jose

Felix Benito Uriburu, a heavy-handed Argentine Army General who spearheaded the military coup that in 1930 resulted in the ousting of President Hipólito Yrigoyen, a noted progressive and co-founder of the Radical Civic Union (RCU). In November of 1931, under the aegis of Uriburu's administration and as a result of voting corruption, Augusto P. Justo was elected President. Serving from 1932 until 1938, Justo ushered in a wave of conservative policies and positions that marked a sharp departure from the political ethos of preceding years. Thus began the *Década Infame*, a period between 1930 and 1943 that saw political tumult, widespread corruption, financial instability, and a cultural reshaping that permanently recast Argentina's identity.

The years before General Uriburu's coup were marked by remarkable progressivism in Argentina. Prior to the presidency of Yrigoyen, Argentina had seen tremendous economic growth under the tenure of presidents whose administrations took a decidedly conservative bent in later years. President Yrigoyen, branding himself a "man of people,"<sup>2</sup> captured the presidency in 1916 and implemented policies that strengthened the immigrant middle class, secured universal male suffrage, increased employment, and more generally projected a sense of "integrity and democracy" that captured the hearts and minds of working Argentines.<sup>3</sup> His party, the Radical Civic Union, also gained in power and influence, sparking a consolidation of previously fragmented conservative forces that viewed the rise of a "reformist democracy"<sup>4</sup> with a wary eye. Despite Yrigoyen's broad appeal and popular initiatives, enthusiasm for his administration began to wane in the wake of the 1929 global economic crisis. Argentina's most prominent newspapers grew highly critical of Yrigoyen, and there was a pervasive sense that the

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra McGee Deutsch, "The Right under Radicalism, 1916 – 1930," in *The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present*, ed. Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald H. Dolkart (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1993), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 37.

aged President was losing control of his administration.<sup>5</sup> This, coupled with the coalescing and renewed vigor among rightwing groups, gave rise to exchanges with the army that carried out the 1930 coup.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the reemergence of conservatism in Argentina was neither swift nor smooth. Conservative groups had exerted considerable influence during the early twentieth century, and opposition to progressivism had been taking root in the years preceding the 1930 coup.<sup>7</sup> But much of the right wing still found itself fragmented and amorphous at the start of the 1930s. After taking office, President Augustin Justo distanced himself from Uriburu on account of the latter's strong nationalist and corporatist tendencies.<sup>8</sup> A new right and an old right also concretized during this time, which temporarily combined to advance their shared agendas. The old right, embodied in the Partido Demócrata Nacional, represented the most prominent landed Argentine families, protecting them with policies and directives that fostered a perverse oligarchical liberalism which had characterized early twentieth century Argentina and resulted in the country's economic ascendancy.<sup>9</sup> The budding Nacionalistas, by contrast, appealed to urban centers and middle class workers, many of whom were drawn to the party's calls for renewed patriotism and corporatism.<sup>10</sup> However, these two camps encompassed even smaller and more specialized political subgroups, which had a fissiparous effect on the right during the 30s.

President Justo devised and endorsed policies that were at variance with those the country had seen under Yrigoyen's tenure. There was, therefore, a general perception among Argentines

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<sup>5</sup> Jorge A. Náállim, *Transformations and Crisis of Liberalism in Argentina, 1930 – 1955* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Deutsch, "Radicalism," 50.

<sup>8</sup> Mario Rapoport, *Historia económica, política y social de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Primera Clase Impresores, 2006), 198.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald H. Dolkart, "The Right in the Década Infame, 1930 – 1943," *The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present*, ed. Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald H. Dolkart (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1993), 65.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

that conservatives represented the landed elite, whereas members of the RCU incarnated the interests of the burgeoning middle and working classes – a view vindicated by congressional voting records of the 1930s, which indicate consistent conservative opposition to programs impacting the middle and lower classes.<sup>11</sup> It was as if the “workers and farmers, small merchants, industrialists and land owners” had been pit against a regime intent on promoting oligarchies, catering to the rich, and chipping at the influence of the working classes.<sup>12</sup> There is, in short, no doubt that class tensions were amplified in the 30s, with rigged elections, unpopular domestic policies, and a lagging economy fueling discontent in various quarters.

Apart from a changing and increasingly tense political climate, the economic landscape was also dramatically shifted during this time. For much of the 1930s, Argentina was plagued by the scourge of economic contractions, a condition exacerbated by the chilling of relations with Great Britain, its principal trading partner. In 1933, President Justo signed the first of what would be two lopsided accords with the British, both of which embittered Argentines, who resented what they perceived as being “degrading”<sup>13</sup> arrangements. Apart from stoking discontent, these pacts also led to an increasing emphasis on import-substitution industrialization,<sup>14</sup> which expanded domestic industries and diversified product lines.<sup>15</sup> Though Argentina rebounded comparatively quickly from the 1929 crisis, Justo’s accords with British reshaped what had historically been an export-led economy and deepened Argentina’s self-image crisis.

The push-and-pull between conservatives and leftists engulfed the whole of the country, making for a particularly fruitful period of writing. Publications of all stripes sprouted across

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<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Walter, “Politics, Parties, and Elections in Argentina’s Province of Buenos Aires, 1912-42,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 64 (1984): 717.

<sup>12</sup> Tulio Hl. Donghi, *La Argentina y La Tormenta del Mundo: Ideas e ideologías entre 1930 y 1945* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, 2003), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Sandra McGee Deutsch, *The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890 – 1939* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 205.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Rapoport, *Historia económica*, 215.



provinces, with the Argentine intelligentsia writing even more prolifically after the start of the Spanish Civil War. Public disaffection with the Justo, and later President Ortiz, grew markedly during the decade, and the sharp political reversals triggered by General Uriburu's coup jolted both liberals and conservatives into action. The following accounts lend insight into the nature of this mobilization and the decidedly cultural form it assumed.

### A SHARED CULTURAL HERITAGE

Though the perspectives of the educational elite may not accurately capture the grievances and sentiments of all societal rungs in Argentina, they still give shape and substance to the era's zeitgeist, especially given that much of their writing was published in magazines and newspapers with sizable readerships. More important for the purposes of this examination, however, is the recognition that the dire political situation in Argentina temporally aligned with the turmoil in Spain, sparking an intense vicarious investment in the outcome of Spanish Civil War — a crisis which would, in the eyes of many, carry profound implications for the identity of Argentina.

One open letter, signed by a number of prominent Argentine writers and penned August 1, 1936, was directed to the Spanish ambassador, and it lamented the bloody civil war of a country intimately bound to Argentina. "Their conflicts," they wrote, "reverberate in Argentina with greater intensity than those of any other country in the world."<sup>16</sup> Describing the Spanish as "brothers," the authors – which included Jorge L. Borges, Alberto Gerchunoff, and other luminaries – affirmed their support for the Republican cause "that today defends the government of their homeland."<sup>17</sup> Exhorting the ambassador to side with those fighting for democracy, the

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<sup>16</sup> Enrique Amorim et al., "Mensaje de los escritores de la Argentina," *El Mundo*, August 1, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, SL, 2012), 816.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

authors also stressed the civil war had extended into “homes”<sup>18</sup> of Argentina; that is, it stirred and perturbed the population as if the battles were taking place within its own borders. From the beginning of the war, then, the Argentine intelligentsia was seen couching their message in a language that subtly emphasized the cultural stakes for the country.

A mere thirteen days later, another open letter, published in the same newspaper but signed by twice as many Argentines, articulated more specific grievances. While not explicitly affirming their support for Franco, this letter constituted a direct anti-republican challenge to Argentine intellectuals who had penned the August 1<sup>st</sup> letter in the same publication. In it, the authors decried the destruction of art and churches and denounced “[the] cruelties ... being perpetrated by the parties of the communist republic.”<sup>19</sup> The authors also lamented the threats on the life of the Argentine ambassador to Spain<sup>20</sup> and made no pretenses of paternalism. Instead, they called for civility in the face of conflict and placed their sympathy with those who “restore the nationality, the religion and the glorious tradition of their homeland.”<sup>21</sup> Their emphasis on “glorious” traditions hints at the perceived cultural implications for Argentina, which, if not an equal, at least viewed itself an heir to Spanish culture.

This last notion is evoked explicitly and implicitly in a number of written accounts. Take, for instance, Leonilda Barrancos de Bermann, a spirited political activist in Argentina and wife of famed doctor-turned-intellectual Gregorio Bermann. In an interview for *Crítica*, a widely circulated Argentine newspaper,<sup>22</sup> Barrancos highlighted the Argentine affinity for Spain: “Those of us who, over the course of several Argentine generations, feel our native blood ...

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Carlos Ibarguren et al., “Provoca la protesta de escritores argentinos la situación de España,” *El Mundo*, August 14, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 817.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Gutman, “Hace 90 años ‘Crítica’ salía a renovar la Prensa argentina,” *Clarín*, September 15, 2003, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://edant.clarin.com/diario/2003/09/15/s-04901.htm>.

know instinctively who actually defends the traditions, history, and culture of Spain. We side with those intellectuals who ... have made the proletarian cause their own.”<sup>23</sup> We see, then, not only an invocation of proletarian solidarity, but an explicit appeal to the understanding that Argentina is an inheritor of the trappings and traditions of Spain. In like manner, Samuel Eichelbaum, a leading Argentine playwright and writer, warned in 1936 that ““the fate of the Hispanic culture”<sup>24</sup> was in the hands of those fighting in Spain. “If they don’t triumph,” he cautioned, “Spain and the Hispanic countries will sink in a retrogradation that will destroy all that which is vital to our culture.”<sup>25</sup>

Not all appeals to a shared cultural heritage were as explicit. In a 1936 article, Argentine Senator Mario Bravo, a noted orator and progressive within the Senate, spoke of a changed hispanoamericanism, that is, of a warmed relationship between Spain and former colonies — not just Argentina. According to Bravo, this relationship had called forth “that which is most sacred to the liberty and dignity of man..”<sup>26</sup> Archaic notions of Hispanic exceptionalism and of an exalted language had been superseded by an ““hispanoamericanism” stressing “the solidarity of class [economic] interests ... [and] the liberty of those who are oppressed.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Rosa Bazán de Cámara, a prominent Argentine professor and feminist, wrote romantically of Spanish Civil War without drawing a direct comparison to Argentina. She described the essence of Spain as having a “purity,” or being impregnable to the coming and passing tides of change<sup>28</sup> — the

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<sup>23</sup> “El drama de España visto desde la Argentina,” *Crítica*, September 8, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Eichelbaum, “Lo que opinan sobre la Guerra civil de España los delegados del Primer Congreso de Escritores,” *Galicia*, November 22, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 265.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Mario Bravo, “Hoy, y solamente hoy, España ha entrado en nuestro corazón,” *Córdoba*, October 27, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 163.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> “Qué piense usted de la situación actual de España,” *Vida de Hoy*, November 2, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 135.

implication being that perhaps Argentina was subjecting itself to unwanted transformations. Her message was couched in terms of a conscious and enduring Spanish volition: “If other countries have accepted changes that have altered the basis of their essence, Spain has not accepted them ... [i]t is Spain, with its history, its tradition, its culture, that is to say, Spain in body and soul, that in these moments is battling between life and death...”<sup>29</sup>

Catholic intellectuals also invoked Spain’s grandeur in their formulations. Apart from fostering close ties to Justo’s administration, most clergy openly supported Franco’s regime through a host of publications, penning articles with sharp nationalist and antiliberal overtones.<sup>30</sup> Shortly after the start of the civil war, for example, a number of prominent Catholic intellectuals authored a manifesto in which they condemned Spanish Republicans and saluted those fighting “heroically ... for their fatherland’s nationality, religion, and glorious traditions.”<sup>31</sup> Particularly interesting to note here is that both camps were seen stressing their ties to *madre patria*, meaning that appeals to Spain’s history and grandeur were able to accommodate disparate messages – that is, to fit the rhetoric of conservative and liberal Argentines alike without posing any direct contradictions.

Francisco Luis Bernádez and Alfonso Durán are two conservative Franco sympathizers who are illustrative of this last point. Bernádez, a noted Argentine poet and reporter, published a review for a book in *Crisol*, a small newspaper notorious for its biting prose, in December of 1936.<sup>32</sup> One passage of the review contained references to “an Argentina founded on the Crucifix

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jorge A. Náállim, *Transformations and Crisis of Liberalism in Argentina, 1930-1955* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Jorge A. Náállim, *Transformations and Crisis of Liberalism in Argentina, 1930-1955* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>32</sup> Niall Binns, *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales* (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 145.

and the sword,” terms which figured prominently in the rhetoric of *Franquistas*.<sup>33</sup> The reference to the cross was surely a nod to the Catholic tradition in Spain, and the reference to the sword conjures Spain’s storied medieval incarnation. In response to those claiming the Spanish Civil War was running too long, Durán, a conservative priest and writer, compared the conflict to the American Civil War and then asked in 1938: “Why must one say that this Spanish war has run long, when it attempts to save not two million men, but twenty-five million Spanish men and their glory, their tradition, their religion, their catechism, their art, and their soul and flag?”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the symbolic importance the war carried for Argentines cannot be understated.

The centrality of the Spanish Civil War in Argentina, particularly among the country’s intelligentsia, bespeaks of the narrative-forming capacity the *outcome* of the war was thought to hold. In other words, Spain’s emergence, either as democracy or fascist state, would have a profound impact on Argentina’s self-conception, a country facing its own crises in the 1930s but also long thought to have been the torchbearer of prosperity, modernization, and Spanish culture in South America. Indeed, claims to *madre patria* abounded, with intellectuals of all persuasions jostling to declare allegiance to Spain. Little, however, was established in these discussions, with the engagements serving more as a sort of exercise for Argentina, one in which intellectuals and politicians could, implicitly, outline the way in which culture was informed by the politics of their own soil.

### A WAR FOR CIVILIZATION

As previously explored, Argentina’s political scene was undergoing its own transformations during the *Década Infame*. The ascendancy of conservatism and relegation of

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 145.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 255.

progressivism gave way to latent class tensions. In addition, both liberals and conservatives had begun casting Argentina in their own light, evincing profound differences in the values held across parties but also similarities in what each thought would appeal to the public. Spain had experienced comparable political turmoil during the 1920s and early 30s, and so there was a natural inclination on the part of Argentines to draw parallels –parallels which took on distinct cultural, political, and ideological forms. In the process, Argentines sought to determine the significance of the war in the context of their own country. For much of Argentina, the triumph of one party wouldn't just signal an ideological victory; it would mark a paradigmatic shift in the world's conception of living and civilization.

Take, for instance, the year 1936, when the Argentine Congress passed a number of reactionary bills, among which was a bill that sought to suppress communist activities. Proposed by the Justo administration, the bill was broadly aimed at curbing free speech and imposing harsh sanctions for those suspected of being affiliated with communism. It sparked heated exchanges between congressional members, some of whom made reference to the turmoil in Spain as an example of what would happen in Argentina. One such member, conservative Senator Matías Sánchez Sorondo, who was also the bill's principal spokesperson, pointed to the effect communism had on Spain: "Moscow's will, never flagging and even reinforced by a global revolution, has carried out in the Spanish example. Those who prefer not to listen or witness should not lament the consequences."<sup>35</sup> Sorondo claimed Spain was combating the presence of "barbarians," and "saving with the heritage of civilization with blood and pain."<sup>36</sup> His references to "heritage" and "civilization" implied the war concerned more than just ideology; it was about the preservation of a cherished heritage, one that Argentina also bore on

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<sup>35</sup> Congreso de la Nación Argentina, *Represion de Actividades Comunistas*, December 4, 1936, 134.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

its shoulders. Sorondo used the “Spanish example” to draw a direct parallel to Argentina, suggesting present conditions in the latter were not only comparable to those in Spain, but that they would yield same fate if the country did not eradicate communists with the passage of the proposed bill.

The notion that the Spanish Civil War carried ideological implications beyond its own borders is also seen in the accounts of Colonel Carlos Gómez, who at the time was a retired professor of *La Escuela Superior de Guerra*, a military academy in Argentina. Of his many articles, most of which focused on evaluating the military strategy of the Spanish Civil War, one in particular, titled “The Spanish War and the State of International Affairs,” discusses the significance of the conflict in the context of global affairs. He writes:

It had been a while since the world had last seen a crisis in international relations so acute as the one we are presently witnessing ... But the actual Spanish war is about the clashing of two ideologies, fundamentally opposed and irreconcilable, that divide, not just Spain, but the people of many countries, threatening to extend to the entire inhabited world; and we don't say “civilized” because the ideological battle has been carried, from one place, to even those peoples with the most rudimentary cultures..<sup>37</sup>

Gómez's perspective is telling in that he thought the Spanish Civil War was of “global interest.”<sup>38</sup> Implicit in his account is the assumption that the clashing of two ideologies in Spain would be encompassing or, at the very least, emblematic of the ideological dichotomies elsewhere – Argentina included. To some, then, the universality of the war was clear.

Enrique Dickmann, a Jewish doctor, author, and congressional legislator in Argentina, shared in this view. At the height of Spanish Civil War, he proposed passing a congressional

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<sup>37</sup> Carlos A. Gómez, *La Guerra de España: Comentarios Publicados en “La Nación”* (Buenos Aires: Tomo Primero, 1939), 93.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

declaration that expressed Argentine support for the establishment of a democracy in Spain.<sup>39</sup> After conservatives emptied from the chamber upon hearing his proposal, he decried neutrality and noted the hypocrisy of those who were “a democrat in his own country and a fascist internationally.”<sup>40</sup> A similar but more expansive view is seen in an article Dickmann wrote for *Revista Socialista* in September of 1937. The article, couched in romanticism, discusses the battle between fascism and democracy, with references to “the free men of the world” and the “universal and eternal transcendence” of the war.<sup>41</sup> Dickmann suggests the war’s “consequences are projected in time and space; because in [Spain’s] civil war, two utterly clear conceptions of man in society, of government, of human material and mental progress, of social justice, have been polarized.”<sup>42</sup>

Argentine newspapers cast the war in even broader terms, that is, as having implications for civilization and humanity. *Crítica*, for example, affirmed its support for the Republican cause in a 1936 editorial entitled “Why we are with Spain.” “All that which stands for spiritual, social, and political progress,” the article reads, “has been incorporated into the world’s culture, over these past two centuries, is at jeopardy in Spain.”<sup>43</sup> The piece ends by noting socialists were shouldering “the cause of civilization and of justice,”<sup>44</sup> an utterance which echoes Dickmann’s pronouncements. Relatedly, Guillermo Delgado, a medical student and Argentine activist, wrote in Córdoba, a provincial Argentine newspaper: “The potential of youth, the potential of humanity

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<sup>39</sup> Binns, *La voz de los intelectuales*, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, S.L., 2012), 250.

<sup>41</sup> “El caso de España. Democracia y dictadura,” *Revista Social*, September, 1937, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, S.L., 2012), 251.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “Por qué estamos con España,” *Crítica*, September 2, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, S.L., 2012), 232.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



which is now being put into action, today uplift an invincible Spain that presages a new era in the history of civilization.”<sup>45</sup>

La Fronda, a conservative Argentine newspaper founded and run by a cousin of General Uriburu, took part in the same brand of sensationalism. In an article entitled “Civilization or Barbarism,” the paper discussed the two perspectives taking root in periodicals across the country. On one end, sensationalism characterized the prose of some publications, and on the other, venues were declaring a disingenuous neutrality toward the war. To the latter, the paper responded: “But that is a great hypocrisy ... The battles of Spain transcend its frontiers and affect the future of political civilization in Europe and the Americas.”<sup>46</sup>

### A SOCIAL WAR

By way of contrast, El Mundo, a left-leaning Argentine newspaper publishing in Buenos Aires, framed the civil war not as concerning civilization *per se*, but as relating to the social order. One article in particular, detailing the arrival of Republican troops in Madrid, discussed the rising tensions coursing through “coffee shops” and “stores” in Argentina.<sup>47</sup> “Spain has been – is currently – the site of the first social war in history. The ideas and sociological theories most contemporary and ancient – communism and fascism – the conception of a better world, brandish at this hour the arguments of canons, grenades, tanks, planes....”<sup>48</sup> Though the battle between ideologies is still reduced to fascism and democracy, the more expansive references to a social war invoke the notion of class divisions, particularly divisions as emanating from ideological differences. While surely the Spanish Civil War concerned class to a great extent, it

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<sup>45</sup> “La cultura en el pueblo,” *Córdoba*, October 12, 1937, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, S.L., 2012), 245.

<sup>46</sup> “Civilización o barbarie,” *La Fronda*, August 9, 1936, *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, S.L., 2012), 431.

<sup>47</sup> “La emoción de Buenos Aires ante la anunciada caída de Madrid,” *El Mundo*, November 8, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, S.L., 2012), 268.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

was not its principal concern. The newspaper's characterization, then, reflects more directly on the way in which conditions in Argentina were coloring perceptions of the war.

This last point rests on the assumption that the manner in which a subject is discussed can say more about those discussing it than of the subject itself — a phenomenon that can be observed firsthand in the previous article. The article notes, for instance, that the debates “about the moving tragedy of Spain” taking place on the streets of Buenos Aires contained no shortage of individuals “who boasted historical erudition and true comprehension of social theories....”<sup>49</sup> There was, then, a perception that Argentines not only understood the war in Spain, but could also make sense of the competing social visions at stake, an observation indicating that this was a topic widely discussed among citizens. In consequence, *El Mundo*'s framing of the Spanish Civil War as a *social* war says more of Buenos Aires than Madrid.

Carlos Ibarguren, an eminent Argentine intellectual and politician, believed mainstream discussions of the Spanish Civil War were misplaced. Refraining from lofty references to civilization and humanity, Ibarguren instead commented on the war's potential to alter the “systems” of countries.<sup>50</sup> In particular, he posited the “politico-social” organization would be changed such that collectivism would reign supreme, suffocating individualism and democracy in the process. This perspective stems in part from the author's thinking that “nationalism” would take the place of “internationalism, [largely] because Spain is a deeply traditional and profoundly religious nation.” He finishes, “a social war is the threat from which Europe now suffers.”<sup>51</sup> Ibarguren is thus more specific in his articulation of the stakes and transformations attendant on the war, stressing, as with *El Mundo*, the social dimensions.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>50</sup> Carlos Ibarguren, “La guerra social es la actual amenaza que sufre Europa, dice el publicista Carlos Ibarguren,” *Los Andes*, August 28, 1936, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, S.L., 2012), 406.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Nicolás Repetto, a medical student and affiliate of the Socialist party,<sup>52</sup> took to writing about the significance of the Spanish Civil War in *La Vanguardia*, a Socialist Argentine newspaper. His elegant articulation of Argentina's affinity for Spain gives substance to the complexity of the relationship, and it contrasts from previous accounts in that it outlines Argentina's own troubles:

If one analyzes superficially and extracts hasty conclusions from certain events taking place in our country and the rest of the world, one necessarily arrives at discouraging findings. Within our country we see strength, injustice and fraud ingrained; Outside of our country shocking governmental mechanisms affirm and extend themselves in such way that they stand as the absolute negation of all that which had heretofore considered essential and irreplaceable in the political life of nations.<sup>53</sup>

The war, according to Repetto, had resulted in an especially troubling realization for Argentina. It meant, in particular, that virtually all that which the country held dear in "political life" was being put to test abroad, prompting the recognition that whatever happened in Spain would likely presage Argentina's own fate.

### **DISTANCING, DETACHMENT & REDUCTIONISM**

Not all periodicals subscribed to such reductionism, however. *La Nación*, one of Argentina's largest and arguably most influential newspapers, lamented what it saw as passive participation in discussions of ideology. In a biting 1937 editorial, the paper sardonically noted the country's unending obsession with politics, proceeding then to lambast the ideological reductionism: "the people whom we have considered intelligent as a result our great naiveté –

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<sup>52</sup> Nicolás Repetto, "España y la República. No es un esfuerzo estéril la defensa heroica," *La Vanguardia*, May 1, 1938, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 680.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 681.

and what is most disconcerting of all, is that they often are intelligent – can’t possibly comprehend that a person chooses not to belong to the left or right, as if there were no alternatives, as if sensibility and intellect were incapable of situating themselves among other latitudes.”<sup>54</sup> The act of independent thinking, they wrote, was lost in favor of adopting popular ideological positions, especially and most paradoxically among intellectuals.<sup>55</sup>

La Prensa, another prominent Argentine newspaper, took a similar but differently angled position on the war. Reflecting on the second anniversary of the civil war, the newspaper published an editorial in which it described the conflict as one “difficult to define or classify, because interventions of other countries have complicated and bestowed it with the character of a global war....” It was difficult, therefore, to see the distinctly *Spanish* character of the war; it concerned, according to the paper, the grandchildren “of those who, over the course of several centuries, gave glory to Spain and made it master of half the world.” Spaniards could not resolve it from the interventions and recommendations of other countries. “Such circumstances,” they wrote “prevent one from clearly seeing the genuinely Spanish character of this war.”<sup>56</sup>

Some in Argentina more explicitly distanced themselves from the Spanish Civil War, though they were by all means in the minority. Manuel Ugarte, a noted author and Socialist Party adherent, is one such person. In October of 1936, he founded *Vida de Hoy*, a magazine that sought to foster an “hispanoamericansim”<sup>57</sup> independent of Spain and other European countries. On the subject of the Spanish Civil War, he urged detachment:

“It is not possible to comprehend, nor to justify within the bounds of logic, those feelings stirred up within us, alongside tinges of colonialism, every time the interests of others are

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<sup>54</sup> “El mal del siglo,” *La Nación*, February 21, 1937, in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 347.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “Dos años de guerra en España,” *La Prensa*, July 17, 1938 in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 440.

<sup>57</sup> Binns, *La voz de los intelectuales*, 775.

at stake. Unfortunately, such was the case in the war of 1914 and such threatens to be the case now ... Let's think of ourselves now, without having news cables dictate hatred or sympathy; let us discard intellectual bellicosities and the mobilizations of masses that participate instinctively. The real Argentinean, the authentic Argentinean, has no motive to fuel the fire ... and has even less motive to carry over to this continent the agitations of a civilization which kills itself.<sup>58</sup>

This call for detachment demonstrates the degree to which Argentines were following developments in Spain, but it also speaks to the emotional investment Argentines were placing in the outcome of the war.

The Argentine newspaper Córdoba also called for detachment, though less explicitly than Ugarte. The Spanish Civil War was, according to an editorial published in 1936, “in the end, the European war.” It concerned the vitality of capitalism in Germany, Italy, England, and France, and was launched by those seeking to “Europeanize nations.” The editorial thus deemphasized the implications the war would carry for Argentina, which was mostly insulated from the dynamics of European politics. The article finishes with a touch of fatalism: “Let us not delude ourselves. The conflagration is now a given.”<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The cultural bridge between Spain and Argentina was inexplicably strong. So much so, in fact, that the pains and passions attendant on the civil war were said to have been felt with special force in the former colony. In spite of these professed ties to *madre patria*, however, Argentine claims to a shared cultural heritage may have been rooted more in romanticism than reality, with the desire to affirm Argentina's exceptionalism and Hispanic otherness, especially

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in *Argentina y la guerra civil española. La voz de los intelectuales*, comp. Niall Binns (Madrid: Calambur Editorial, Sl., 2012), 776.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

in the wake of the 1930 coup, driving such claims. There was, moreover, something to be gained from associations with Spain: in drawing links to its former colonizer, organizations could broaden their appeal and legitimize their functions. If we stand as the continuation of something Spanish — the thinking might have gone — we can claim to be participating in a historical and identity-shaping movement.

This last point hinges on the assumption that Argentina was experiencing an identity crisis, a lofty but otherwise defensible assertion in light of the foregoing exploration. The variety of references to Spain, coupled with the remarkable diversity of perspectives on the war, indicates that Argentines were trying to make sense of their ties to Spain. Many of the previous accounts emphasized notions of culture, history, and tradition — all elements of national identity — suggesting they were truly at the fore of national consciousness in Argentina during the 30s.

Identity crisis aside, one cannot also understate the degree to which Argentines expressed disaffection with President Justo and later Ortiz, both for their fraudulent political victories but also for their undoing of Yrigoyen's initiatives. Spaniards had experienced a similar disaffection in previous years, and so Argentines pointed to the turmoil in Spain to suggest a comparability of conditions. In other words, Argentines articulating the stakes, contingencies, and circumstances of the war in Spain were, implicitly, doing the same for Argentina — almost as if in anticipation of upheaval. There was, in the eyes of some, no reason why the Spanish Civil War could not spell Argentina's own future.

This discussion also extends to the disparate framing of the Spanish Civil War, which is unique for two reasons. First, it means reporting on Spain was communicating vastly different conceptions of the war. Second, it suggests the war was being refashioned to suit particular narratives, a task necessitating some degree of distortion and exaggeration. It is precisely for this

reason one observes Argentines framing the war as one for humanity, culture, and civilization. And it also for this reason the realities of the war may have been lost in the process, reflecting instead the tensions of Argentina and the ways in which those tensions were shaping collective understandings of wartime conditions in *madre patria*. Spain was, to be sure, a puppet in the hands of some.

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